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The Palestinian-Israeli Fight: Arab Lands Now Spectators

By THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

The Israeli air strike Tuesday against the P.L.O. headquarters in Tunis underscored the degree to which the Arab-Israel conflict has been transformed in the last year. It has gone from a conflict primarily between Israel and the surrounding Arab countries to a struggle almost exclusively between Israel and the Palestinians, with the Arab countries as spectators.

Although the scene of the latest clash was Tunis, Israeli statements and actions suggest that the real motivation stems from events that have been taking place inside Israel and the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip.

There, during the last 12 months, the level and ferocity of Palestinian attacks against Israelis have intensified, going from stone-throwing and tire-burning incidents to abductions and stabbings committed by individual Arabs against individual Jews

16 Israelis Slain

In the last year, 16 Israeli men and women have been killed — most with kitchen knives or pistols — in such attacks in Israel and the occupied territories, as well as in nearby Cyprus. At least 12 others have been wounded.

This wave of violence is new, Israeli military experts and West Bank Arabs say, in that while a substantial amount of it appears to have been directed by the P.L.O., the majority of the attacks by Palestinians against Israelis inside Israel and the occupied territories have been locally generated by individual Arabs who use crude homemade weapons and display an audacity never before seen in the West Bank.

Examples are the recent stabbings in broad daylight of two heavily armed Israeli soldiers in Hebron and the shooting at point-blank range of Israeli soldiers in Ramallah and El Bireh earlier in the year.

Israeli Retaliation

In many ways, the Israeli raid on the P.L.O. office near Tunis appears to be a retaliation for this new, and to Israeli authorities, extremely frustrating series of Palestinian attacks.

"Why should we delude ourselves regarding what's happening between us and the Arabs who are under our control?" Zeev Schiff, the widely re-

spected military editor of the newspaper Haaretz, wrote, "The events which are occurring are the buds of a civil war, another round of war between two populations grasping the same plot of land."

'The Coals Are Glowing'

"Ironically," Mr. Schiff continued, "it is the local and individual initiative of several of the murderers, stabbers and shooters which proves that the coals are glowing right here and are not always imported from Amman or Beirut, Damascus or Algeria."

While Arab officials in the West Bank publicly condemn these acts of violence against Israelis, in the privacy of their homes some Palestinians are quietly cheering the attackers on. In interviews, several West Bank residents said that when the two Israeli soldiers were stabbed in Hebron, phrases such as "God preserve the belly of the mother who produced the stabbers" and "God protect the hand that stabbed them" were whispered in many an Arab house.

In a way, said Meron Benvenisti, a former Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem who is the leading Israeli expert on land use in the West Bank, the Arab-Israeli conflict seems to be shrinking back to its pre-1948 roots.

The conflict first went through a pan-Arab phase and then a P.L.O. phase, both of which were characterized by local Palestinians looking to outside forces to bear the brunt of the fight. But now a new attitude seems to be developing among Palestinians of the occupied territories that the only way to maintain their hold there is to take the initiative themselves. This feeling seems to have become particularly acute since the decline of the P.L.O. as a military force capable of putting pressure on Israel.

"This is a grass-roots reaction," Mr. Benvenisti said, "and Israelis will have to address themselves to something real now — not an enemy across the border but one within, which is just where the conflict started 100 years ago."

Palestinians, Israeli experts on Palestinian history and the Arab-Israeli conflict, and military officials who deal with the West Bank say this transformation is a result of developments both historical and recent. They include the rise of a new, more militant generation of Palestinians in the West Bank, the influence on it of the war in Lebanon, the actions of the Israeli settlers, the transfer of some P.L.O. offices to Amman, Jordan, and the impact of the release of 600 Palestinian

terrorists into the occupied territories as part of a prisoner exchange.

The experts nearly always begin their explanations with the new generation of Palestinians that is now turning 18, 19 and 20 years old in the West Bank. These Palestinians have known no other life than that of Israeli occupation, and they refuse to accept the docility of their elders.

Changing Viewpoint

"The old generation of leaders, the contemporaries of King Hussein and Yasir Arafat, are gradually dying out and being replaced by young leaders who have grown up and developed under Israeli rule," a recent analysis in the rightist newspaper Maariv said.

It continued, "A local resident researching his Ph.D. thesis conducted a study of what was termed 'changes in viewpoints regarding the occupation regime,' from which it emerged that if the parents' generation loathed Israel as a state, the children hate Israelis both as Jews and as people."

Among the old leadership, the newspaper added, it was customary to compare the way the Israeli administration rules to what the heavy-handed Jordanian administration did in the territories, and "so to make do with the lesser of two evils."

But the new generation cannot draw that comparison. "For them," the paper added, "there is but one real, hostile regime which they encounter day in and day out, and which they are forced to confront at every road junction, every movie theater entrance and every bridge over the Jordan River." The regime referred to is Israel.

Nervousness About the Future

Members of this young generation have become increasingly nervous about their future on the land, according to many Palestinians as well as the Israeli experts.

Mona Rishmawi, a 27-year-old Palestinian lawyer in Ramallah, explained: "When young people here add up the pressures coming from the settlers, the stories now emerging about how hundreds of Arabs were swindled out of their land, the rise of Kahane and the double system of justice here, which allows Jewish terrorists to get light sentences when they do violence to Arabs and Arabs to get heavy sentences when they do violence to Jews, then you can see the logic of why some of them go out and commit some of these acts." "You know," Miss Rishmawi added, "when I was growing up I constantly heard my mother's story about how she was driven out of her house in Jaffa. We heard it over and over, and it became kind of a family legend, but I never really thought it would apply to me here in the West Bank. But now I think many young people are beginning to realize that their parents' stories may end up being their stories as well — that we will be kicked out too because some fanatic holding a Bible in his hand says that this is his land and we have to get out."

The writer of this article is the Jerusalem correspondent of The New York Times, now visiting the United States. The article is based on his reporting in the Middle East.

Less Fear of Israelis

Not only do the younger Palestinians carry a sharper sense of grievance than their parents. They are also less afraid of the Israelis than are their elders.

"The generation that grew up in the territories before 1967 witnessed Israel crush three Arab armies at once," said Amnon Cohen, an expert on Palestinian history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

"They were shocked by this and they took the might of the Israeli Army for granted. The young generation do not suffer from this shock. They grew up with the Israeli Army of the 1973 war and Lebanon."

A 30-year-old Palestinian activist who lives in Jerusalem and recently completed a prison term for planting bombs against Israelis said, "People are not afraid of the Israeli soldiers like before. Before we used to call them 'supermen,' but not anymore, not after what we saw happen in Lebanon."

In three recent incidents, Israeli troops shot and killed one Arab and wounded six others who had refused to halt and produce identification.

Example of Lebanese Shites

The ability of the Lebanese Shites to drive the Israeli Army out of most of Lebanon appears to have had an important psychological impact on West Bank youths and to have contributed, in part, to the new wave of violence.

One Palestinian journalist explained: "Every night on Syrian, Jordanian and Israeli television young people received news of successful attacks against Israeli soldiers. They saw the Lebanese get the Israelis out by making their lives hell and inflicting casualties. Many think, why not do the same here? They can't get explosives here, so they go into the kitchen and get a knife instead."

Another factor encouraging this trend, the experts say, was the release last May 20 of 600 convicted Palestinian terrorists to their homes in the West Bank and Gaza Strip as part of an exchange of 1,150 prisoners for 3 Israeli soldiers.

Israeli military officials say they believe that the 600 prisoners freed to the occupied territories, who included some of the best-known Palestinian killers of Israelis in the last 20 years, are not themselves engaging in subversive activities. They are all being very closely watched. However, the military officials said, the freed prisoners serve as important role models.

Traditional Leaders Undermined

In the last 18 years, Israel has systematically destroyed the traditional Arab leadership in the West Bank and Gaza Strip through expulsions or dismissals from posts. Only one mayor of a major Arab town, Elias Freij of Bethlehem, remains in his job, with virtually all other such towns under the administration of military governors. In the absence of strong, authentic and moderate local leaders, the young generation has been looking to the released prisoners for inspiration. When the prisoners were released, Palestinians say, there were celebrations that went on for days in villages all over the West Bank.

One former prisoner, who served more than a decade in an Israeli prison for planting a bomb that killed and injured Israelis, spoke in an interview last week about the reception he and his fellow prisoners received.

"Wherever I walk, people want to come up and shake my hand or try to kiss my hand," the former prisoner said. "I don't let them kiss my hand. That is not right. But I do shake a lot of hands."

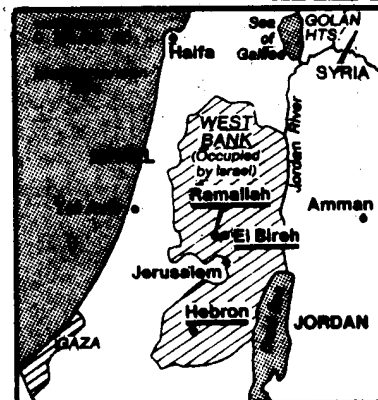
'Now It's Your Turn'

One of the most senior Israeli military officers in the West Bank said in an interview that he was walking through the market in the Old City of Jerusalem two weeks ago when he saw a former prisoner being mobbed by young people and shopkeepers wherever he walked, like a Pied Piper.

"I was shocked," the Israeli officer said. "This man had a lot of Israeli blood on his hands. I am sure that he is not going to do anything again, but I am also sure that he is telling young people, 'Look, I did my job for the armed struggle, and now it's your turn.'"

Another factor that has subtly facilitated the recent violence, the experts said, has been the weakening of Israel's intelligence-gathering capabilities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip as a result of the Lebanon war.

The day-to-day gathering of intelli-



Attacks on Israeli soldiers have been made in recent months in Hebron, Ramallah and El Bireh.

gence in the West Bank was always carried out by agents of the Shin Beth, the security agency that is Israel's equivalent of the F.B.I. However, when the Israeli Army invaded Lebanon, the Shin Beth, with its experienced case officers and members fluent in Arabic, had to transfer much of its resources to help with the occupation there. Many of its agents still work in southern Lebanon.

Some Agents Died

According to Israeli military sources, about 20 Shin Beth agents were killed during the invasion of Lebanon and in the suicide car-bombing of the Israeli intelligence headquarters in Tyre on Nov. 4, 1983. That is more than all other losses sustained by the Shin Beth since it was established in Israel's early days as a nation.

"The main tool for fighting terrorism is intelligence," a senior Israeli officer in the West Bank said. "The Shin Beth had been geared to deal with the territories but shifted because of Lebanon. Also, the new generation of Israelis coming into the army these days was born here, and fewer and fewer of them can really speak fluent Arabic the way an intelligence officer must and the way the generation before them, which immigrated from Arab countries, did. Intelligence needs infrastructure and we really have to go through a process of rebuilding in the territories."

In addition, the nature of the violence in the territories is changing, making it more difficult to detect in advance, the military officer noted. At most, he said, only 50 percent of the recent violence has been directed from the outside.

Taking Initiative

The rest, he said, was undertaken by individuals who are no longer willing to wait for the P.L.O. to win the fight for them. They act on their own or in self-contained small groups that are very hard to penetrate.

The Shin Beth was set up to crack terrorist cells and detect infiltrators dispatched or controlled from abroad. Very few of those responsible for the recent violence have been caught. Those who have been arrested, such as the two youths accused of stabbing an Israeli truck driver in Gaza three weeks ago, have been found to have acted on their own initiative.

Still, the P.L.O. presence in Amman has undoubtedly contributed something to the recent spate of attacks, the Israeli military officials said. Even though the Jordanians try to make certain that the P.L.O. does not engage in any cross-border violence, the presence there of dozens of P.L.O. security officials makes it much easier for them to make contact with the thousands of Palestinians who go to Amman and back every month by way of the Allenby Bridge across the Jordan River.

Pointing to Arafat

"Two years ago a young man from the West Bank would have had to go to Tunis or Algiers if he wanted to get in touch with the P.L.O.," a senior Israeli military officer in the West Bank said. "Now they are waiting for him 20 miles from the Allenby Bridge. They have meeting places, safe houses and they can easily send in money, or a knife or instructions."

Israeli military officials say they believe that Mr. Arafat, the P.L.O. chairman, has been impelled to step up violence inside Israel because he is reportedly considering recognizing Israel's right to exist as part of a Jordanian-P.L.O. initiative to open a dialogue with the United States.

"It is the 'Christmas bombing of Hanoi' theory of violence," said the Israeli officer, referring to the bombing of North Vietnam by the United States in December 1972, which preceded the signing of a truce agreement in Paris the following month. "Strike hard just before you negotiate in order to build up credibility within your own ranks to be able to make concessions."

The last factor contributing to the increase in Arab violence, according to

Continued

Israeli military experts and Palestinians, has been the behavior of the Jewish settlers. They have become increasingly aggressive in trying to expand into densely populated Arab areas, attacking the homes of the Palestinians released from prison and conducting armed patrols in the main streets of West Bank towns after Israelis are attacked.

The settlers say they believe they are just reacting to Arab violence and are demanding the security to which they feel entitled as Israeli citizens.

However, Israeli military experts say the settlers have been provoking the Arabs — Rabbi Moshe Levinger, a leader of the settlers, sat outside a refugee camp for two months waiting for an Arab to throw a stone at him — and trying to pressure the Government into rekindling the settlement drive at a time when it has run out of money to finance new settlements.

"The settlers say they are moving into the Hebron marketplace because they want to live with the Arabs," Amnon Cohen, the historian, said. "In reality they want to replace them. They want friction in order to justify bringing the army in and imposing harsher security. We must not only condemn Arab aggression but Jewish aggression."

In fact, in the last two weeks both David Levy, a minister from the right-wing Likud bloc, and Prime Minister Shimon Peres, leader of the left-of-center Labor Party, have scolded the settlers for trying to take the law into their own hands.

"The presence of the settlers in densely populated areas adds to the Arab anxiety that the Israelis are closing in on them and that desperate steps are necessary," the senior military officer in the West Bank said. "The settlers want the security on the road to Hebron to be as perfect as the security on the road to Tel Aviv. They forget that this is occupied territory."

Shlomo Gazit, a former head of military intelligence who was the military governor of the West Bank from 1967 until 1974, said that people forget how far the current Israeli approach to the West Bank has moved from the original philosophy of occupation instituted immediately after the 1967 war.

The original philosophy of Israel's military government, said Mr. Gazit, who has just completed a book on the subject titled "The Carrot and the Stick," was twofold: "It said, first, that we must wait for a political settlement to determine the fate of these areas and that settlement will not be between Israel and the local inhabitants but between Israel and some outside power. Until that settlement comes, the two sides should find a way to live together with the minimum damage to both."

"Secondly," Mr. Gazit continued, "we Israelis argued that 'We were as embarrassed at being a military government as much as you Arabs are suffering. Hence, if you behave yourself, you will not see us, you will not notice our patrols, you will not feel our presence.'"

After all of the settlement activity, though, Mr. Gazit said, this philosophy has been almost totally forgotten. To protect one settler around the clock in the middle of Hebron now requires more than a dozen soldiers and support personnel, he said, and that creates an additional layer of security on top of the continuing occupation.

"Our original philosophy doesn't hold water anymore," said Mr. Gazit. "We have gone from a policy that subtly facilitates peace and quiet and keeping all political options open to one that subtly facilitates the closing of political options. This latest wave of violence may calm down, but things cannot go on like this. I don't know whether it is going to be the summer of '86 or '87 or whenever, but if this situation continues there is going to be a real explosion."